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ABSTRACT

An innovative approach to the teaching of poetry to juniors in high school is described. The subject matter selected for the class was "Spoon River Anthology," and students were then asked to write poems to appear in their own "Kyte Creek Anthology." The students were given copies of 40 poems from "Spoon River," and each orally interpreted one poem. A discussion was then held of the poems, and questions were asked to help students outline an incident that occurs in "Spoon River." When a thorough analysis of the poetry was completed, the students listened to a record of the 40 poems, performed by a professional. The students were each issued an outline to use as a guideline in developing poetry for their "Kyte Creek Anthology," a copy of which is provided. The poems were compiled in booklets, and students taped the material, using sound effects. After listening to the tapes, the students discussed their efforts and wrote critiques. The anthologies then went to the school newspaper for reproducing for the entire school. The students received two grades for their work--group criticisms from the teacher and criticisms that the classes had written. A sampling of poetry from "Kyte Creek Anthology" is given. (DB)

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Kyte Creek and *Spoon River Anthology*

By A. L. Reynolds
Rochelle Township High School

Poetry is probably one of the most difficult genres to teach to high school students. At least that was my first impression when I used the word "poetry" in describing the next unit of study for my two average-tracked junior classes. Disappointed *moués* seemed to appear on everyone of the fifty-two faces at merely the mention of the word. Anticipating such an uninterested response, I had a different kind of poetry unit planned which I had thought and which later proved to me to be a more interesting and effective approach to poetry for the students.

The selection of the subject matter had to be determined first. All the students live in the general area of Rochelle, Illinois, a small town with a population of about eight thousand. Often I would hear the students commenting about the people and events that were taking place in their own town. Their comments called to my attention Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology,* which also had an early beginning in Illinois small town life in Petersburg and Lewistown.

The poetry in *Spoon River* appeals to adolescents, especially those from small towns who know by experience many aspects of small town life that can be seen in Masters' work. The anthology is extremely concrete for easy teenage understanding: each poem is a short story in the form of the epitaph that reveals a side of life from an individual point of view. Students frequently frown at sing-song rhymes about places that are remote to them; *Spoon*

River is in free verse. Also, *Spoon River* presents the common everyday problems and aspects of living that students can immediately apply to their own lives.

Being influenced by some of Marshall McLuhan's concepts, I wanted the unit on poetry to entail many skills that would give the students opportunities to utilize individual work, group work, the oral language, and the written language in a single unit. Too often subject matter is isolated as if it were apart from everything else. I intended to have my students feel that poetry is read, spoken, created, heard and discussed, which is why the unit turned into a project and into a period of study that lasted for approximately seven weeks.

Although seven weeks may seem like a very long time for one unit, there were many things to be accomplished. The students would be given opportunities to create their own poetry, to express their work in both the written and oral languages, and to criticize their poems along with the poems of their fellow students. They would also be applying previously learned knowledge from the former semester, such as figures of speech, dialects and accents, and the tools of the oral and written languages. Even such tasks as making ditto masters, creating related art work, creating related sound effects, and solving organizational problems concerning the compilation of an anthology would all be included. Most important, I wanted the students to become deeply involved and consequently become interested in poetry.

The very first day of the new unit consisted of a brief introduction of Edgar Lee Masters and his *Spoon River Anthology*. Parallels between Rochelle and the Spoon River area were drawn: they are both small town areas; they are both in Illinois; they are both near small rivers, Kyte Creek and the Spoon. We even discovered that a relative of Edgar Lee Masters who held the same last name had once lived in Rochelle. In addition, the uniqueness of Masters' poems was emphasized: it was pointed out to the students that the Spoon River "people" that they were about to meet were "talking from the grave."

Also during the first day, the students were each given a ditto copy of the series of Masters' poems that appear on Joseph Cates' original Broadway cast album (Columbia Recordings, 1964), a record that they would soon hear. The album and ditto copies contained a selected forty poems from Masters' *Spoon River*. Each student was assigned at least one poem that they would orally interpret the following day. The students utilized the rest of the

class period by familiarizing themselves with their assigned poems.

At the beginning of the period on the day of the oral interpretations, emphasis was placed on emotion as the key for successful oral interpretation. Each student interpreted his poem in sequence in accordance with the order they would eventually hear on the *Spoon River Anthology* record. Within two days all the poems were heard and a discussion followed.

The discussion was brief: the students really did not understand the poems. I explained again that the poems were about small town life and that everyone knew each other. I then pointed out five poems in the anthology that were directly related to each other: "Dr. Meyers," "Mrs. Meyers," "'Indignation' Jones," "Minerva Jones," and "Willie Metcalf." I asked the students to read the poems again but this time to see if they could point out in what way the "people" were related and also if they could piece together a many-sided story concerning an abortion. The following questions were also asked to help the students outline an incident that occurs in *Spoon River:*

1. How did Minerva die?
2. Who was the fault of her death?
3. Did Dr. Meyers do the right thing?
4. In what way did Mrs. Meyers look upon the incident?
5. Why didn't the town like Mr. Jones?
6. Can you see any reasons as to why the town called Willie Metcalf "Dr. Meyers"?
7. Do you think anything slanderous happened to "Butch" Weldy?

The students, after answering the questions, were then asked more abstract questions concerning the personality of the community in which the abortion incident took place:

1. Was it fair for the town to punish Dr. Meyers?
2. Is a good man allowed to make one serious mistake?
3. Why didn't the town forgive Dr. Meyers?
4. Why was Minerva ridiculed so?

Related questions were also asked:

1. Is anyone in Rochelle ever ridiculed for being fat and cock-eyed as Minerva was?
2. Do you laugh at certain people periodically?
3. Why do people laugh at physically- or mentally-handicapped people?

Poetry mechanics used by Masters were explained and discussed. Included were the conceit as used in the poem "Tom Beatty" when an elaborate analogy is made between life and a poker game, and the anaphora which is exemplified in the introductory poem "The Hill." Many figures of speech were pointed out throughout the selection along with aphorisms such as "Now we who took the bankrupt law in our respective ways/Sleep peacefully side by side" from the poem "Hod Putt," which poetically states the universal truth of the equality in death.

With a thorough analysis of the poetry completed, the students were ready to hear a professional rendition of the *Anthology,* so the Columbia record was played while the students followed with their ditto copies. The recording not only included forty of Masters' poems but also ten related folk songs, accents and sound effects. After listening to the record, the students compared the professional interpretation with their own and unanimously concluded that the former was by far superior. The following is a list of reasons for their conclusions:

1. The record used music which added to the mood of the poetry.
2. The poems were read convincingly and realistically.
3. The poems were easier to understand because the interpreters gave meaning to the words.
4. The use of dialects, accents, laughter, and various changes in voice added color to the poems.
5. The interpreters used more emotion: when they were angry, they sounded angry; when they were sad, they sounded sad.

Coincidentally, the students were then able to actually see Masters' poems performed on stage. The Kishwaukee Junior College presented *Spoon River Anthology* in Rochelle which concluded the first part of the poetry unit.

Part two, *Kyte Creek Anthology,* was to be a collection of original student poems fashioned after Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* using the area of Rochelle as the focal point instead of Lewistown and Petersburg. Because the project was to involve many skills and problems to solve, the sudents were each issued an outline to use as a guideline. The following is a copy of that outline:

I. A typed anthology of original poems using *Spoon River* as a model

   A. This project will be done in groups.

1. There will be no more than six students in a group.
2. Distribution of the work in the project and organization will be done by the group.
3. Each member of the group will write at least three poems; one will be the student's own epitaph.

B. The anthology must contain:
   1. A title page
      a. Art work of some sort
      b. The following information:
         i. The title *Kyte Creek Anthology*
         ii. The name of everyone in the group
         iii. "Mr. Reynolds" and "English III"
         iv. The period of your class
   2. Three poems for each member of the group
   3. An introductory poem and a concluding poem

C. A rough draft will be handed in first on the due date time.

D. Poem requirements:
   1. Each poem must make use of one of the following that we have previously studied in class.
      a. Satire (essay notes)
      b. Figures of speech (class notes)
      c. Dialects and accents (*Language In Society:* Jean Malmstrom)
      d. Symbolism (Hawthorne and Poe notes)
      e. Philosophy (*Man of La Mancha* notes)
      f. Anaphora and aphorism (*Spoon River* notes)
   2. Each poem must be titled with the full name of a fictitious, dead person.
   3. Each group's member's name must also be the title of a poem.
   4. All the poems must relate to at least one other poem in the anthology.
   5. The final copy must be typed on ditto.

II. The oral taping of the printed anthology

A. A sound effect will be used for each poem: laughter, dialect, accent, coughing, music, belching, pounding, sirens, bells, singing, distortion of voice, breathing, whistling, sneezing, crying, *etc.*

B. All the poems in the written anthology will be used in the oral anthology in the same order.

C. One rehearsal with a tape recorder will be given to each group and one final recording. One period of class time will be given for the final taping and one half period will be given for the rehearsal.

III. Grading (two grades)
   A. The written part
      1. Neatness
      2. Originality and creativity
      3. Filling requirements
   B. The oral part
      1. Clarity
      2. Sound effects
      3. Interpretation

The outline was explained to the students with the emphasis placed on relating the poems to each other. The problem was to construct a small town out of poetry, therefore the "people" must know each other, must have common interests and must comment on the same events and each other.

I next began reading a list of the students' names that I had previously organized into groups. My impersonal listing was met with such opposition from the students that I conceded to a bargain: in ten minutes they were to distribute themselves into four groups with no more than six members in each. The groupings were assembled much faster than I could have organized them. With groups ready, their outlines in hand, and the deadline assigned for their rough drafts, the students began to solve their project problems by distributing the work among the group's members while I circulated the floor answering any organizational questions here and there for about five days.

Because it was suggested that early submittance of the rough draft meant an early return and an early start on the final copy, many students handed in their papers before the deadline. After quickly going through their work, I discussed with each group their strengths, weaknesses, and improvements that they could make. The purpose of the rough draft was to see if the groups were having any serious problems before the actual completion of the assignment; the draft was not graded but it was required.

As soon as the group revised their rough draft, they would then begin the final copy. Ditto masters and typewriters were made available; hall passes were given to students who could utilize the typing rooms. Skills in using ditto masters and layout designs for

the pages were explained in accordance with the group's needs. While some students were typing and drawing sketches for the title page, others were practicing the poems that they would be interpreting on tape. After the dittos had returned from the office where they were duplicated, the groups compiled their own poems into booklets and stapled them. Enough booklets were made for a class set with one left for each member of the group to keep.

With each copy of their *Kyte Creek Anthology* in hand, the students were ready to begin planning their oral interpretations of the poems. Decisions concerning who was to do which poem and the selection of the sound effect that was to be used with each poem was left entirely up to the groups. After the two-day organization period, the groups would begin their rehearsal tapings using their sound effects. Each group had twenty-five minutes to complete its rehearsal. A taping room was provided with a phonograph for any records that they might use. Two groups rehearsed a day; for the final taping, an entire class period was used for each group. While one group was taping, the other groups were working on exercises that were assigned in their language books that involved concepts concerning the problems of the oral and the written languages, or they were rereading the poems that they would soon be recording.

Six days completed the eight tapings; there were four tapings in each class. The two classes would hear the tapings made by their own class and the ones made by the other class. Two tapings were heard a day; and while the students were listening to the anthologies, they were also following along with the written copy. The students were asked to write down criticisms of what they heard and what they saw on the printed copy. In so doing, each group would have the opportunity to read critiques of their poetry from seven other groups. The class would then verbalize the comments they had included in their critiques in the form of a brief discussion after each listening.

The students enjoyed listening to their voices, their sound effects, and even their mistakes. They agreed that the sound effect and the emotion put into the poem decided whether or not the poem would be a success on tape. The tapings had a wide variety of different kinds of sound effects such as in the poem "McRed," an Irish accent; in "Elmer P. Massenowski," the figurehead for the fertilizer company, factory pounding in the background; and in "Timmy Fields," the "Love Theme" from the motion picture *Romeo and Juliet*. One group of students used a "Cemetery

Theme" of music throughout their oral presentation by playing 33⅓ Bach on 16 rpm. Communication was accomplished more movingly with the use of special effects.

Reading the critiques after listening to the tapes drew the new poetry unit on *Kyte Creek* and *Spoon River Anthology* to a close. The students received two group grades for their work, criticisms that I had made of their anthologies, and the criticisms that the classes had written. From the classroom, the anthologies then went to the school newspaper where selections and an explanation of the project were printed for the entire school to read. With the criticizing and the grading over, the students asked if they could redo the tapings they had made, with the idea in mind and with the experience they just had, to show that they could improve the oral presentations of the poems. This was the first time I had ever had a class ask if they could do part of a unit over again, especially in poetry.

KYTE CREEK ANTHOLOGY: A SAMPLING

DEVIL'S HOLE

Brenda, Alice, Julie, Tom, and Tim,
Hear their stories
See their fates,
Make your judgments.
People of all kinds,
All jobs, all needs,
Make your judgments.
Don't judge so harshly,
Because you are the same
When you read about Devil's Hole.
Now hear the stories.
Turn the page
From the present to the past.

BY DAN WINKLES

GERTY JONES

What is to be alive?
I was, but I never lived.
I have seen life,
But I was only a spectator.

Is life loving?
I have never loved.
I have never been loved.
I wanted so to live.
People saw me,
But they didn't notice me.
They know who I was,
But they didn't know me.
The earth understood me
And I understood the earth.
I wanted so to be part of something
And now I am.
Can you understand why I did it?

By Carla Wright

GABBY GREENE

I knew Gerty.
Why, everybody knew Gerty Jones.
Nobody got much friendly with her
Since she was touched and all.
Why, I remember some nights
I used to see Gerty walking in the woods
Talkin' to the trees and stones
Just like they were people.
Soon everybody knew about
These strange things she did.
I wasn't the one who spread it around, though.
Why, I just told a few people.
Then there was that terrible night
When Gerty shot herself in the head.
It seems funny what some
People will do just for attention.

By Carla Wright

JOANNE HIGHLAND

Everyone used to laugh at me
And I really don't know why.
Whenever I said something
They would all laugh.

I wasn't trying to be funny
But every time I opened my mouth
I said something wrong.
Sometimes I said things at the wrong time.
I hated people laughing at me.
Even my boyfriend laughed.
The last time we were together
I was talking about something stupid.
He started laughing and couldn't stop.
Then a car turned toward us
But there wasn't a thing he could do.
It was another wrong time.

By Joanne Highland

NONA DAVIDSON

I was born in Rochelle.
I lived there until I was eighteen.
I thought I hated this town.
The people gossiped too much,
They were all too nosey.
They always asked too many
Questions.
I couldn't take it anymore,
I had to leave, I had to get out.
Where I went nobody gossiped,
Nobody was nosey,
Nobody asked questions,
In fact nobody cared
About me.
I missed Rochelle,
I was on my way back, but
I never made it.
I died in a car wreck.

By Nona Davidson

RANDY SNEAKERS

I've tried everything at least once
Except death.
After I left home I hoped they were happy.
It was only because of me that they fought
So off I went to a world filled with experiences

Roaming from town to town,
Yet never finding one exactly like Kyte Creek.
I tried everything and anything,
Had affair after affair,
And the victim of scandal after scandal.
Gambled on Saturdays,
Went to church on Sunday
And all of the time wondering
Wondering if Mom and Dad had stopped fighting
Or if Mom was still seeing Bernard
Or if Daddy was still involved with Rachael.
Wondering how they had reacted to my leaving.
But now, once again we are together.
Yes, now I have experienced everything,
Even death.

By Shirley Meador

DeWAINE SVELA

I was a school teacher like John Lichner or Michael
Vincent or James Egan.
I really tried to teach those kids something.
All they wanted to do was work for the fertilizer company,
Just as their fathers did.
Day after day,
Week after week,
Year after year, for thirty-five years,
All I heard was how much they wanted to work at the
Fertilizer company.
They couldn't care less for math, or spelling.
They knew they wouldn't need to know anything the school
Had to offer.
I tried to tell them that there was more to life than
Just working at the fertilizer company.
They wouldn't listen to me.
So, I quit.

By DeWaine Svela

JOHN PHIPPS

My brains were as scarce as soft hairs on a porkypine.
One day I was 6½ hours late for work,
Because I put my watch on upside down.

The men always laughed at the funny way I walked.
When I got fired from my job,
At the fertilizer company,
There was nowhere but down.
So, I started digging graves at the cemetery.
In time all of my old bosses,
Passed beneath my shovel,
As all things must pass.

By John Phipps

DEVIL'S HOLE SALUTATIONS

Here we are lying,
In the ground,
Cold, barren ground,
Devil's Hole ground,
Kyte Creek people together.
The crank, the scrooge,
The stupid, the smart,
The kind, the hated,
Separate in life,
Very separate.
So separate in life,
Yes, so separate.
We are together now.
Devil's Hole wanted it that way.
Devil's Hole is so kind,
Bringing the distant
Together like this.
So kind is death.

By Dan Winkles